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Governor seeks disaster help for farmers

Drought affecting all 120 counties

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Gov. Ernie Fletcher requested federal disaster assistance yesterday for Kentucky farmers in all 120 counties, citing drought conditions from the third driest May-August period for Kentucky in 113 years.

Abnormally high temperatures and limited rainfall put Kentucky "in severe to extreme drought status and is truly in a state of disaster," Fletcher's letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns said.

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Widespread crop and pasture losses are expected throughout the state, with Southern Kentucky farmers already harvesting corn at yields of 40 percent below average, Fletcher said in the letter.

The request could be answered in about three weeks, said a spokesman for the Farm Service Agency, which will conduct an investigation before

Johanns makes a determination.

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one crop, according to the USDA. If the disaster request is approved, farmers would be eligible for low-interest loans.

Lloyd Murdock, a University of Kentucky Extension soil specialist, said he expects the bulk of Kentucky will meet the federal threshold.

Soybean crops he's seen in Western Kentucky are off this year, particularly those planted after wheat.

In "35 years, I don't think I've ever seen such a serious drought, you know, this time of the year, that affected the plants this much," he said.

The most recent USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service crop report for Kentucky said that one-fourth of the corn and 37 percent of the soybeans were poor or very poor.

"There's people that are going to need a lot of help," said Joe Bischoff, who raises corn and soybean in Jefferson, Oldham and Shelby counties.

Bischoff said he's been relatively fortunate compared to some parts of the state but below-average corn production is still likely overall.

"The jury is still out on soybean plants," he said, and rain is needed.

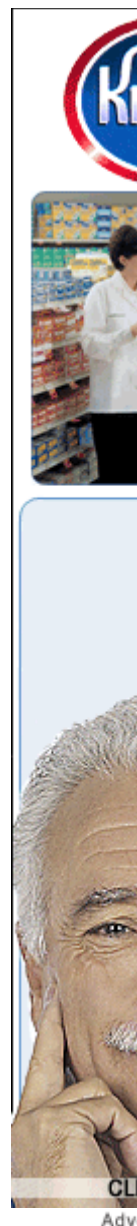
Parts of Shelby County, around Cropper and Bagdad, beyond where he farms, are as bad as he's seen in nearly 25 years.

Reporter Gregory A. Hall can be reached at (502) 582-4087.

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